

Couple give gourmet meals to homeless

GOURMET

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others sleeping in the shelter at Sacred Heart Church on lower Queen Anne Hill. Once a month, they cook for 150 others at Operation Nightwatch, a Belltown referral center for people seeking shelter.

They do it all themselves: shopping Thursday nights, five hours of cooking Saturday afternoons and delivery Saturday evenings.

They don't need to be reminded or called — ever, and when their wedding anniversary fell on a Saturday, they didn't skip a week, they just shifted nights. They do their good deeds all on their own dime — about \$15,000 a year, Walkky estimates.

"What's the point of making a lot of money?" asked Walkky, a court reporter, who wouldn't be specific about her salary but said she is very well paid. "We spend a lot of our disposable income on this."

People at the tent city look forward to the meals all week, and while they've come to expect fine fare, there still are surprises.

Lantz Rowland, who has lived at the tent city for four months, remembers the time the couple brought steaks and, for a few hours, amid the tents and tarps, the group had a cook-out.

"And not just steaks, baked potatoes. And five pounds of butter. And not just butter, but sour cream. And not just sour cream, but chives and bacon bits," Rowland recalled. "It's not just 'Here's a good meal.' It's 'Here's the best thing we can bring you.'"



TOM REESE / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Eric Koester and other tent-city residents gather Saturday to share meals cooked by Margaret Walkky and Steve Bearden.

An act that helps hundreds of people each week started with helping just one.

Bearden remembers seeing a woman from time to time begging for money outside Larry's Market on Aurora Avenue North in North Seattle.

He got into the habit of buying her a sandwich. Once, at the checkout, a cashier remarked that the woman ought to get a job, and Bearden answered that it seemed to him the woman was working pretty hard, for 10 hours, just to get money to eat.

That episode led Bearden to start giving money to Operation Nightwatch, and later, to taking food there. One time, Bearden and Walkky brought too much, and someone suggested they take the extras to the tent city.

Walkky, 49, and Bearden, 51, live well now but haven't always. He once was on welfare; she had lived in a car.

Bearden used to work at a tropical-plants store, but in recent years he has gone back to

school for an associate's degree and is concentrating on music and writing.

They care for three basset hounds and four cats at their home in Seattle's Broadview neighborhood. Bearden collects guitars — about 20 so far — and movie posters — "hundreds," he said. On Halloween the two put on a blow-out party — the casket from this year's get-together is still in the living room.

"We're insane," Walkky said. "We know that we do things to excess."

Maybe that's why they simply say they like to supply tent city with "a few extras" each week after the meal of teriyaki chicken or chili, or jambalaya or lasagna, or sloppy Joes or split-pea soup is gone.

A recent load of incidentals filled the station wagon: 10 dozen eggs, tubs of cream cheese and margarine, 40 pounds of ice to help keep it all chilled, a case of oranges, three 3-pound cans

of coffee, two jumbo jars of creamer, a package of 500 coffee filters, oatmeal, Cream of Wheat, juice, powdered doughnuts, Danishes, 72 packages of instant noodle soup, microwave popcorn, salsa and two 3-pound bags of chips to go with it, Twix, Butterfinger and Three Musketeers bars ("because everybody should have a candy bar once in a while," Walkky said), and hot chocolate with bags of marshmallows.

The long lists and Saturday's profusion of pots and pressure cookers and thermal containers don't overwhelm Bearden and Walkky. The rewards do.

After making a delivery to the tent city, Bearden came home once to report that a Russian man had told him that the flavors of the chicken-and-wild-rice dish of the week before had "brought me back to Russia."

And Walkky, in tears, remembers "a little Mexican man. He thanked us for the meal in his broken English."

"Nothing has ever been so worthwhile," Bearden said. "This brings depth to our lives."

Walkky and Bearden don't stay at the tent city or Sacred Heart while dinner is being served. They don't want that kind of attention.

As far as Walkky is concerned, nothing beats the satisfaction she gets, late at night, in imagining the dinnertime scene: "I lie in bed thinking how someone is licking their lips after having the best meal they've had in a long time. That is the best."

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